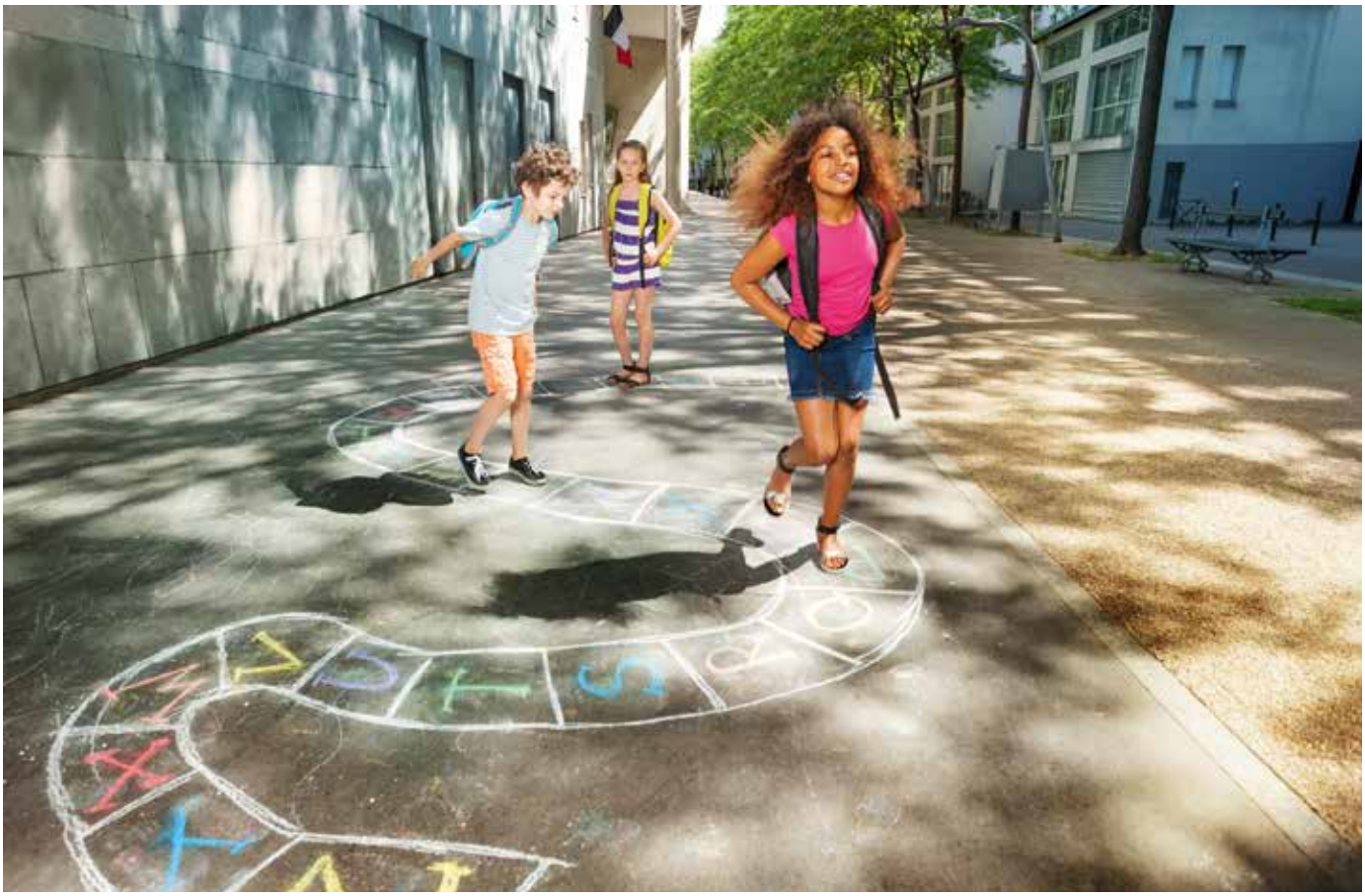
Children's Right to the Good City

Wendy Russell explores the concept of children's right to play as a matter of spatial justice



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'At the United Nations (UN) organized World Urban Forum in Rio in March 2010, the UN and the World Bank both adopted the right to the city in its charter for addressing the global urban poverty trap. Across the street in Rio, at the Urban Social Forum, a people's popular alternative was being staged. Activists there were appalled by the ruling class's re-appropriation of a hallowed grassroots ideal.'

(Merrifield, 2011)

The 'right to the city' has been adopted as a clarion call, but Henri Lefebvre's original intention was very different to its contemporary articulations of rights to urban services and goods, in pronouncements by powerful transnational elites (albeit made with the best of intentions). My aim here is to encourage those of us working as advocates on behalf of children to pause and think a little, to disturb our perhaps comfortable and habitual assumptions about policy and planning for child-friendly cities, to think differently, and to consider children's everyday material and embodied relationships with space and time as a form of political participation in everyday life. I am not setting these up as binary opposites, but as a tension with which we need to work. In doing this, I draw on two conceptual tools offered by Henri Lefebvre (1969-96) and Ash Amin (2006). These are ultimately very practical tools, and have been used in our research on the Welsh Government's Play Sufficiency Duty.

1 Snake hopscotch in the street. Photograph by Sergey Novikov

LEFEBVRE'S RIGHT TO THE CITY

Lefebvre's vision is about the right to everyday social participation, webs of connection, making the city in ways that are not driven purely by the forces of capital, and shared moments that transcend daily drudgery. This is not a binary either/or situation and, despite Lefebvre's anti-state stance, those who advocate for children need to be pragmatic about their engagements in the systems, procedures and policies that order everyday lives. Nonetheless, we should pay attention to how increasingly market-led practice is creating a growing gulf between the super-rich and the dispossessed.

Amin recognises this tension when he suggests that rather than looking for utopian ideals of the Aristotelean 'good' city, we can work with 'a pragmatism of the possible, based on the continual effort

to spin webs of social justice and human well-being and emancipation out of prevailing circumstances' (Amin, 2006 p.1010)

DIFFERENCE

Central to this argument is the idea of difference. City dwellers live and work alongside others who are different in many ways. However, Lefebvre looks beyond the induced difference of fixed groups, arguing for less alienation. For children, this is the right to participate as citizens in their own cultures of playing. The way that we separate children from adults is a form of induced difference. The categorisation of 'child' fixes children as immature, developing through predetermined stages towards the end point of a producing and consuming citizen.

Play is bound up in this future-focused understanding of childhood, valued for its perceived contribution to creating the next generation of citizens onto which we pin our hopes and anxieties for the future. Play is also infused with contradictory romantic ideals of the innocence of childhood and desires to control the worst excesses of unruly behaviour. These rationalising and homogenising ideas create a linear connection between play and development. The provision for children's play is both a recognition of children's right to play and also a site for separating children from everyday life, for organising, structuring and controlling their play experiences in order to support the right kind of development. This vignette gives a different picture.

A VIGNETTE: CHILDREN'S STREET CHOREOGRAPHY

Looking out of my window I see two adults and two children walking up the street. I am struck, as always since I have been paying attention to such things, by the difference in how the adults and children move through the space. The adults are walking slowly, even absentmindedly, in a straight line, chatting and occasionally checking on the children. The children display an energetic and embodied choreography which entails jumping, spinning round, running, hopping. They go forwards and backwards, round and round, and occasionally run to catch up with the adults. They stop to examine interesting aspects of the landscape: flowering weeds growing between the pavement and the garden walls, an empty drink can. They jump in a puddle.

This is a mundane everyday picture of children's different relationship with space, mostly overlooked by adults, sometimes a source of frustration when there is a need to be somewhere by a specific time. Alert to what the environment has to offer, children use it in their own ways, often not as intended by the adults who design, build and manage it. In this way, children disrupt not only the dominant neoliberal construct of childhood and play, but also the functions of urban space. They produce a difference of their own that is more vibrant, moments where life feels better.

PLAY AS PARTICIPATION

The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) is a powerful tool for children's advocacy. At the same time, it tends to perpetuate a quasi-legal understanding of rights, couched in a minority world perspective of individual rights holders, and a universal assumption of the ideal child (i.e. Lefebvre's induced difference).

Within the CRC, participation rights are given less attention than rights of provision and protection. Generally, the right to participation is channelled through article 12, understood as engagement in formal political processes, controlled and interpreted by adults. However, in line with article 15, the right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly, children's play can be understood as a primary form of participation in everyday life. It is an appropriation of space and time, interwoven into everyday life, erupting in the cracks of adult orderings whenever conditions allow. This is Lefebvre's right to the city as the right to produced difference.

Understood in this way, adult roles in urban design and advocacy for children's right to play can take on an additional dimension, alongside and in tension with attempts to influence policy makers, planners, developers and other adult managers of time and space. To consider this, we turn to Amin's four registers of the good city: repair, relatedness, rights and re-enchantment, a framework we used in our research on the Welsh Government's Play Sufficiency Duty.

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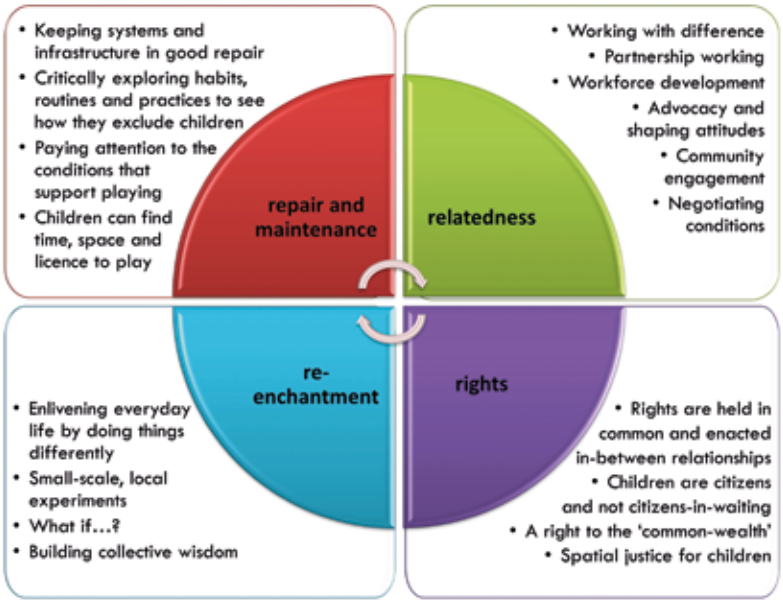
2 An everyday picture of children's different relationship with space. Photograph by Daryl Wilkerson Jr from Pexels

REPAIR: THE POLITICS OF SPACE

At the heart of this endeavour is the need to recognise the politics of space. Urban planning segments space, locating and designating functions largely in the service of the flows of capital. This space operates in what Amin terms a 'machinic order':

'composed of a bewildering array of objects-in-relation whose silent rhythm instantiates and regulates all aspects of urban life... It includes many mundane objects, such as road signals, post-codes, pipes and overhead cables, satellites, office design and furniture, clocks, commuting patterns, computers and telephones, automobiles, software, schedules and databases. These are aligned in different ways to structure all manner of urban rhythms including goods delivery or traffic flow systems, Internet protocols, rituals and codes of civic and public conduct, family routines and cultures of workplace and neighbourhood'

(Amin, 2002 p 1013).



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Such order is necessary for cities to function. Yet it has exclusionary effects, situating specific people in specific places and times, and targeting those 'out of place' with direct and indirect sanctions and prohibitions. This is continually contested and negotiated through small and often mundane disruptions: for example, through children's playful uses of space (avoiding cracks on pavements, climbing on low walls, playing football in supermarket car parks when they are closed) which often go unnoticed.

However, if these infractions become too much of a threat, spaces are re-appropriated. For example my own city of Nottingham's Old Market Square, an iconic skateboarding spot from the 1970s until the early 2000s, where first a byelaw and then a redesign removed the skaters. The landscape architects' website has this quotation from the East Midlands Development Agency on their redevelopment of the square: 'This is a wonderful example of design and regeneration. [The landscape architects] have taken a chaotic area that was a skateboarder's paradise and turned it into a wonderful democratic space thronging with people.'

In terms of urban design and advocacy for children's right to the good city, our role as adults is to critically explore the habits and routines embedded in the machinic order, and work to change them where they unnecessarily prevent children from playing. Alongside this, it is important to keep systems and infrastructure in good repair in ways that support children's ability to find time and space for playing.

RELATEDNESS AND RIGHTS

These two points are linked here in order to stress the approach taken to rights: rather than something held by individual rights-holders, rights are seen as held in common. This helps to move beyond conflictual calculations about whose rights are more important (the rights of those children to play football in the street and this man not to have his car window smashed). It allows a focus on the urban commons, the public goods that should be available to all, highlighting also the nature of space itself. Despite the constraints of hostile architecture, the increasing privatisation of public space, and exclusionary machinic assemblages, a participatory approach to rights is still possible. From this perspective, playing is a political act of making the city, producing something different and better.

This is where cross-professional working becomes important, building a collective wisdom of different ways of knowing, through professional development and working together to pay attention to how children actually use time and space. This should include those involved in spatial and urban planning, highways, housing, green infrastructure, health, education, justice, recreation, playwork, youth work and many more. It is also where inviting children to share their expert knowledge comes into play. What we have learned from our research in Wales is that using ethical, creative and space-based methods with children (e.g. map-making, photography, walkabouts) yields specific information about *that* space at *that* time for *those* children, allowing particular responses.

3 Ash Amin's four registers adapted to research on the Welsh Government's Play Sufficiency Duty.

RE-ENCHANTMENT

Amin's final point concerns the right to the city in order to share in creating something of joy. Play itself is an enchantment with the world, creating moments when life is worth living. For urban designers and play advocates, paying attention to children's skill and ability to co-create such moments, and working towards supporting this, is also an act of re-enchantment with life. Small, what if...? experiments that playfully disturb the habitual order of things have the potential to be acts of re-enchantment for adults as well as children.

IN CONCLUSION

Reading children's right to play through Lefebvre and Amin produces a different way of thinking about play, urban design, and advocacy. Whilst acknowledging the need to engage with existing systems, we can develop an optimistic and ethical pragmatism to work toward spatial justice for children, facilitating the means for them to participate in making a better city.

'Being enchanted does not deny there are intolerable cruelties and injustices woven into everyday life... but an attachment to wonder enables an ethical, generous response and holds off an overwhelming cynicism that is so prevalent'.

(Lester, 2016) ●

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